

# The Elements of a Persuasive Essay

*"Rhetoric, then, may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever."*

*- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), from "Art of Rhetoric"*

*". . . we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and found cities and made laws and invented arts. . ."*

*- Isocrates (436-338 B.C.), from "Antidosis"*

No one structure fits all written argument, but every well-written student essay should contain each of the following elements:

**1. Title.** A good title will introduce the topic of the essay, suggest the author's tone, and, perhaps most importantly, lure the audience into the introductory paragraph.

**2. Introduction.** The introductory paragraph sets the context for the position that is argued in the essay, establishes the author's tone, and convinces the audience that the rest of the essay is worthy of a reader's time.

Some introductory paragraph strategies include:

- providing relevant background information
- telling an interesting anecdote
- giving a pertinent statistic or statistics
- asking a provocative question or questions
- using an appropriate quotation
- drawing a useful analogy
- defining a key term used throughout the essay
- identifying the situation.

**3. Thesis statement.** The thesis statement states the position being argued. It must present an arguable position. In a short essay, the thesis statement often

appears as the last sentence of the introductory paragraph. The thesis statement makes a claim that the rest of the essay will attempt to prove, and it may also reveal the pattern of development that the essay will assume.

**4. Background information.** The essay must provide the reader basic information needed for understanding the position being argued. This information can be part of the introductory paragraph, can appear in its own paragraph, or can be provided in body paragraphs where it is necessary. Careful analysis of the audience's requirements for background information must be made. Too little background will confuse the audience, whereas too much simple background can be insulting.

**5. Reasons or evidence.** The thesis must be supported in the body paragraphs. This material is the core of the essay. Each type of evidence or reason usually consists of a general statement backed up with specific details or examples. In literary analysis, the best examples are usually direct textual citations. Depending on the length of the essay, one or two paragraphs are devoted to each reason or presentation of evidence.

The best sequence for presenting the complete set of reasons and evidence depends upon your desired effect. Moving from evidence most familiar to your audience to evidence least familiar helps the reader to move from the known to the unknown. Moving from evidence that is least important to the evidence that is most important will allow you to provide your best evidence in the most memorable position. Generally, moving from weakest to strongest evidence is best in establishing a logical appeal.

*"For the orator to produce conviction, three qualities are necessary; for independently of demonstrations, the things which induce belief are three in number. These qualities are good sense, virtue, and goodwill . . . These qualities are all that are necessary, so that the speaker who appears to possess all three will necessarily convince his hearers."*

*- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), from "Art of Rhetoric"*

**6. Anticipation of likely objections and responses to them.** To convince your audience of your "good sense, virtue, and goodwill," you must mention positions opposed to the one being argued and rebut them briefly. This refutation can appear in its own paragraph, and in classical argument it appears immediately before the concluding paragraph. An alternative placement is immediately after the introductory paragraph as a bridge to the body of the essay; in this arrangement, the essay's thesis statement falls either at the end of the introductory paragraph or at the end of the refutation paragraph. In still another arrangement, each body paragraph that presents a reason or evidence also mentions and rebuts opposing positions. Rebuttals should always include supporting evidence. Remember that your anticipation of opposing points of view and your rebuttals will in large part determine your audience's evaluation of your ethos.

**7. Conclusion.** The concluding paragraph brings the essay to a close that flows logically and gracefully from the rest of the essay. It does not cut the reader off abruptly, but neither does it dawdle.

Strategies for concluding include

- a call for awareness, action, or similar type of resolution
- looking ahead to the future
- drawing a parallel to a similar situation or text
- summarizing the main points of the essay, but avoid doing this in essays short enough that the audience is likely to remember them
- using a device from the list of introductory strategies, but usually avoid using the same device in both the introductory and concluding paragraph.

*“To prove is the first necessity, to please is charm, to sway is victory.”  
- Cicero (106-43 B.C.), from “Orator”*